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Horlings, L.G.; Roep, D.; Wellbrock, W.

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The role of leadership in place-based development and building institutional arrangements

LG Horlings

University of Groningen, The Netherlands

D Roep 

Wageningen University & Research, The Netherlands

W Wellbrock

Universitat Hohenheim, Germany



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Abstract

In various case studies across Europe the vital role of rural place leadership in enabling a place-based approach to local and regional development has been highlighted, although not always explicitly addressed as such. This paper aims to do so by reviewing the findings from a selection of earlier research projects within a framework of the role of rural leadership in place-based development. Building on the increasing body of literature on place leadership, the review reveals how place leadership in rural areas is performed by varied public, private and civic actors; is able to bridge vested stakes and make new connections; is supportive to joint learning and innovation and an increasing range of bottom-up grassroots initiatives. Effective rural place leadership initiates joint reflection and enforces a collaborative spirit resulting in an expanding spiral of new alliances and new (institutional) arrangements. This underpins the importance of rural place leadership in building collective agency and its capacity to better attune the institutional setting to the specificities of place and thus enhance place-based development.

Keywords

collaboration, innovation, institution, joint learning, place-based development, place leadership

Corresponding author:

LG Horlings, Department of Spatial Planning and Environment, Faculty of Spatial Sciences, University of Groningen, Landlevan 1, Groningen 9747AD, The Netherlands.

Email: l.g.horlings@rug.nl

Introduction: A place-based approach to development

This paper reviews the role of effective place leadership in sub-national rural regions in varied institutional contexts in Europe. Our point of departure is that rural place leadership can enable a place-based approach to development. In the context of EU policies, place-based approaches to development have become more important in the last decade, for example in the view of EU member states (EU, 2007), in European policies for social cohesion (EC, 2010a) and territorial cohesion (EU, 2011) and in the development strategies and practices for the EU programming period after 2013. After the challenges in meeting the goals of Lisbon and the strategy for the 2010s in Europe, Europe 2020 (EC, 2010b) puts more strain on places and regions to achieve smart, sustainable and inclusive growth based on their specific characteristics and dynamics.

Scholars have argued that place-based approaches to development will strengthen the resilience of rural areas against global transformative forces by decreasing state dependencies and increasing the economic competitiveness of rural areas (Bristow, 2010; Taylor, 2012). Place-based approaches, often guided by utilizing endogenous assets, including knowledge and the institutional base associated with a particular locality, 'offer the scope for developing strategies that better represent tailor-made policy actions embedded in, and linked to the specific needs and available resources of a locality' (Hildreth and Bailey, 2014, cited by Bentley and Pugalis (2014: 284)). The place-based mode of working in areas has been conceptualized as inclusive of embedded, multi-scalar and multi-annual strategies that are tailored to the complex geographies, capabilities, knowledge sets, assets and resources of particular places (and networks of places),

through supportive institutional frameworks and collaborative means of governance (Bentley and Pugalis, 2014). Nevertheless, Bentley and Pugalis (2014) argue in this journal that as a persuasive notion and policy response, place-based modes of working lack conceptual clarity and operational precision.

Decentralization of public administration has profoundly influenced the current interest in place-based development. This rests on the claim that a region's capacity to innovate is conditioned by the quality of regional institutions (Rodrigues-Pose and Di Cataldo, 2015). Institutions tailored to the specific setting can make a significant contribution to the process of (competitive) economic growth in places (Rodriguez-Pose, 2013; Tomaney, 2014). Key argument of Rodriguez-Pose (2013) is that the right balanced mix of formal and informal institutions is needed. However, not clear is how to realize such a balance, how to rearrange both the formal and informal rules sets which make up an institutional setting in a place-specific way and who can take the lead in this. This is a rather unexplored field. Furthermore, comparative research at the sub-national scale is limited (Acemogly and Dell, 2010). And while the OECD (2015) has analysed the relevance of leadership in local economic development in cities, the role of rural place leadership needs more scholarly attention. This paper therefore reviews the role of effective place leadership in sub-national rural regions in varied institutional contexts in Europe. Place-based approaches acknowledge the transformative role of structuring processes such as globalization on places, but also the transformative agency (Westley et al., 2013) of human actors making a living in these places, shaping a place according to their values, ideas and needs. Human actors are not merely victims of globalization (Long, 2001), but capable actors shaping places by their meaningful conduct (Massey, 2004;

Tsing, 2000). The agency of individuals and collectives helps to create particular evolutionary trajectories over time, leading to differentiated social and economic outcomes in places (Gertler, 2010: 11).

There has been something of a 'spatial turn' in leadership research, with a focus particularly upon sub-national levels, and this research has added to our understanding of the relationship between leadership, knowledge and spatial economic development (Horlings et al., 2017). Place leadership on the sub-national level can be seen as the 'missing link' in our understanding of how to enable place-based development and local economies (Beer, 2014). In addition to local authorities, the last decade has seen new groups drawn into the sphere of local economic leadership and development, such as city networks, business leadership groups, universities, and civic bodies; the institutional landscape of most local economies is expected to become increasingly dispersed in the future. Local economic development is a multi-sectoral form of public intervention, and arena for substantial innovation, where leadership can set the agenda and builds the context for progress (OECD, 2015). In addition, scientific literature has recognized the formal and informal role of business leadership in enterprising places (Pugalis et al., 2014) and civic leadership (Hambleton, 2015). Civic leadership is an approach that values solidarity, community empowerment and democratic social purpose, as an alternative to both centralization and the outdated notion of New Public Management (Hambleton, 2015). Martiskainen (2017) focuses on specifically the role of community leadership in supporting grassroots innovation.

Place leadership is assumed to be key in (re)balancing formal and informal rules sets, or institutions, governing practices (Horlings and Padt, 2013; Sotarauta and Beer, 2017; Sotarauta et al., 2012).

Without repeating these claims, we build here on the increasing body of literature on place leadership, also in this journal (Hambleton, 2015; Horlings et al., 2017; Liddle et al., 2017; Potluka et al., 2017; Quinn, 2017; Rossiter and Smith, 2017) and aim to further unravel the role of place leadership in initiating and enabling the building of capacities to attune the institutional setting, transforming its embodied relations, as to make it more supportive to place-based development. This brings us to the main question addressed in this article: What role does rural place leadership have in effectuating place-based development and more specific, in raising the collective agency needed for building collective capacities and supporting institutional change or innovation? We will argue that formal and informal relations between stakeholders of different stakeholders in the different domains of (1) public administration; (2) everyday practices on the ground and (3) the knowledge support structure, can be supported by place leadership by establishing appropriate 'well-working operational interfaces' (Wellbrock, 2013) between these domains. Place leadership can initiate these interfaces and support an expanding, spiralling process of expanding collaboration, building alliances and collective capacities which can then result in new institutional arrangements. The contribution of the paper therefore lies in the unravelling of change on the sub-national level underpinning the relevance of the quality of institutions (see also Henry and Pinch, 2001; Rodriques-Pose and Di Cataldo, 2015) and the role of leadership therein. By reviewing specifically rural cases on the sub-national level, we show how institutional mechanisms support the embeddedness and intertwining of different domains.

These are issues that are yet not sufficiently addressed. Gertler (2010) has, for example, argued that institutional analysis should provide more analytical room for

the agency of individuals and collectives; needs to incorporate processes of institutional evolution and change over time; must account for the interaction between institutional configurations at different scales; and finally, would profit from adopting comparative methodologies. Sotarauta and Beer (2017) argue that few accounts of place leadership have found an appropriate balance between structural determining processes versus the creative force of human actors. This has resulted, on the one hand, in an overemphasis on the actions of a limited number of charismatic leaders and, on the other, structural analyses blind to the decisions and actions of individuals and groups.

These issues are addressed in this article via:

1. A review of literature regarding the conceptualization and framing place leadership in the context of a relational approach to place-based development ('The role of leadership in place-based development' section), underpinning the multi-scalarity of institutions and the relevance of place leadership in changing the quality of interrelations between institutional domains.
2. A review of the findings from multiple EU research projects. We selected those EU projects and cases in rural areas across Europe where effective and thus successful place leadership could be witnessed, reflecting on how this leadership played a transformative role in supporting place-based development and under which conditions ('Exploring the role of place leadership in enabling a place-based approach to development in European rural areas' section). These reflections further underpin the relevance of creating new relations, new interfaces and new forms of collaboration between practitioners from different domains. Such relations are supportive to joint

learning and innovation, build collective agency and potentially change the institutional setting.

3. Providing an in-depth analysis of the *Westerkwartier* area in the Netherlands as a showcase for the transformative capacity of rural place leadership ('Place leadership in the *Westerkwartier*' section). How, in a 'spiralling' development, it has initiated and supported new links and operational interfaces between the domains of knowledge, everyday practices and public administration, effectively sustained by new institutional arrangements.

In the concluding section our findings and reflections regarding place leadership will be embedded in the theoretical debate on the importance of building transformative capacities and institutional innovation supportive to place-based development.

The role of leadership in place-based development

Place is an assemblage of relations reconfigured through processes of restructuring and continuously changing as a result of economic, institutional and cultural transformation (Woods, 2015). This relational notion of place (Amin, 2004; Cresswell, 2004; Massey, 1991, 1993, 2004) considers places as nodes in networks, as points of intersection, in which the global and the local are mutually constructed and seen in terms of connectivity. A relational perspective on place understands and emphasizes the importance of networks and connectivities (Horlings, 2018; Varro and Lagendijk, 2013). Such an approach analyses places as part of a wider set of relations, which are shaped by material and ideational ordering processes. This is even more relevant in the context of an increasingly knowledge-driven world economy. Economic actors

are not isolated beings who carry out atomistic behavioural scripts, but individual norms, preferences, values, tastes, ethics, needs, styles and objectives emerge from and are co-constituted through the social embedding of economic action and interaction. This underpins the relevance of knowledge circulation across territories (Horlings et al., 2017), relational clusters of knowledge and geographies of practices (Bathelt and Glückler, 2011; Wall, 2013) and a relational approach towards place-based development (Horlings, 2018).

Places can be analysed, by investigating place-shaping practices and the way practitioners reflect on and give varied meanings to the places they co-shape (Horlings, 2018). The social and material specificities of places cannot be seen on its own, as being shaped by endogenous processes vis-à-vis exogenous processes affecting the place. Place is time and space specific, and therefore differentiated (see also Escobar, 2001, 2008), and the outcome of the interaction and co-evolution of human and non-human place-shaping processes, which connect a place to other places via a web of social-material relations. Places are framed and co-shaped by a set of in time and space unbound political-economic, socio-cultural and ecological structuring processes (Roep et al., 2015). A 'politics of connectivity' acknowledges place as dynamic outcome of these processes and how place has a threefold relational relevance as arena of negotiation, as a context where subjective processes of sense-making happen and as site of policy interventions and spatial planning (Horlings, 2016, 2018). A detailed understanding of how such processes work across different places and the factors that lead to differentiated outcomes is, however, still missing in policies (Woods, 2013: 100).

Similar institutional settings work out differently in places (Farole et al., 2011: 74; cited by Tomaney (2014)). Although

the actual institutional setting, and more particular how it has evolved in a specific place, does matter, this is often not fully taken into account (Rodríguez-Pose, 2013). We refer here to institutions, inspired by Amin (1999) and Gertler (2010), as both explicit and formalized sets of rules, such as regulations, laws and organizations, as well informal or tacit rule sets or taken-for-granted 'rules of the game', e.g. habits, routines and social norms and values.

Institutions are an intangible factor that, appear to be durable and mouldable at the same time but difficult to intervene in, by an 'outsider'. Key argument here is that the right balanced mix of formal and informal institutions is needed (Rodríguez-Pose, 2013). The OECD emphasizes that institutions are needed that foster linkages between different domains to support development:

Formal and informal institutions that facilitate negotiation and dialogue among key actors in order to mobilize and integrate them into the development process are vital, as those that enhance policy continuity ... the challenge is to create institutions that strengthen the region's voice in dealing with other regions and countries and those that foster linkages among the private, public and education sectors. (OECD, 2012: 25 cited by Tomaney (2014))

This taps into the debate on institutional thickness and thinness. The concept of institutional thickness highlights institutional conditions that are crucial to the articulation of localities and regions within wider scale processes of economic transformation (Henry and Pinch, 2001). Economic development is not a question of creating institutional thickness or thinness *per se*, but about 'what works'. For example, institutional 'thick' places do not guarantee access to these institutions. An overload of overlapping or conflicting institutional

arrangements can put up barriers. To avoid bureaucratization, fragmentation and high transaction costs some experimental collaborative space within the prevailing institutional setting has to be created in order to be able to reform the setting itself. Furthermore, we have to recognize the multi-scalar notion of thickness (see also Amin and Thrift, 1995) which underpins the relevance of a relational approach and acknowledge that historical developments such as institutional thickness can be an effect rather than a cause of economic growth, being a process of political mobilization as much as of economic mobilization (Henry and Pinch, 2011).

The agency of individuals and collectives helps to create specific evolutionary trajectories over time, leading to differentiated social and economic outcomes in places (Gertler, 2010: 11). Agency implies the ability to (re)negotiate the conditions of engagement in structuring processes (Wood, 2016). It is the capacity of practitioners to reassemble and thus transform the prevailing web of relations they are part of in a way that is more beneficial to them. Building human capacities, both individual and collective agency, is thus key to effectuate a place-based approach to development (Wellbrock et al., 2013).

Capacity-building and community empowerment do not take place in a spontaneous, self-regulating, inclusive and organic way (Skerratt and Steiner, 2013). Various authors have warned us not to have a romantic, naïve view of rural communities where civic harmony and inclusion triumph and there is little room for power struggles, exclusionary tactics or ideological conflicts (Gilchrist, 2009; Shortall, 2008; Shucksmith, 2010). Furthermore, experiences show that capacity building requires long-term interventions which are 'sensitive to differences within communities; manage tensions and expectations; and include a

variety of ways for people to contribute their ideas' (Gilchrist, 2009: 32).

Leadership is often referred to in literature as individuals 'who make it happen', using varied names in literature, e.g. champions, policy entrepreneurs, change agents, social innovators or transformative leaders to mention just a few (Westley et al., 2013). In these studies leadership is considered to be an individual capacity to order others what to do, based on strong hierarchical relations in decision making. However, such forms of top-down, command and control forms of management are often not effective (Greenleaf, 2002; Gunderson et al., 1995; Holling and Meffe, 1996; Wheatly, 1995). In contrast, place leadership is often referred to as shared, cooperative or collaborative, because of the challenge to deal with a variety of stakeholders and vested interests in places. It has been referred to as multi-agency, multi-level and multi-faceted and shaped differently according to various institutional and cultural contexts. It can support knowledge networking across thematic, organizational and administrative boundaries (Beer, 2014; Beer and Clower, 2013; Collinge and Gibney, 2010; Collinge et al., 2010; Gibney, 2011; Horlings et al., 2017; Liddle et al., 2017; Potluka et al., 2017; Pugalis et al., 2014; Rossiter and Smith, 2017; Sotarauta et al., 2012).

Place leadership can play a key role in guiding and facilitating transformation by stimulating imagination, the (re-)framing of issues and the development of new agendas and help to 'think the unthinkable' (Horlings, 2010). Leadership can even be transformative in contributing to more adaptive management and governance systems (Olsson et al., 2006). Davies (2013, cited by Ayres (2013)) reminds us that catalysts for change and innovation can have limited influence, but a large impact on place and society. Strategic collective agency is pivotal in moving a process

of transformation forward: ‘within complex problem domains such strategic agency is typically not associated with just one individual, rather is produced through the strategies of a number of actors’ (Westley et al., 2013: 27).

Place leadership is not just recognized in terms of formally constituted hierarchical power, expressed by formal offices – mayors, members of government-appointed boards, etc. – but also is expressed informally, sensitive to the concrete setting, which makes it possible to create a shared development vision and work as ‘connector’ between different actors. This refers to the ability of leaders to influence the ways collective interpretations emerge and are shaped (Sotarauta, 2009), and to how they facilitate existing place development strategies; however, leadership may also (try to) alter the direction of development (Halkier, 2013). In other words: place leadership contributes to the (re-)framing of issues, the communication of a so-called sticky story (Van der Stoep, 2014), to have different actors aligned around a joint agenda. Leadership skills such as formal and informal communication, building trust, perseverance, flexibility in roles and the ability to connect different worlds and logics are key elements of place leadership. It can be considered as mobilizing, agenda setting and task oriented, paying attention to the socio-emotional side of group dynamics, engaging with various stakeholders and crossing thematic, geographic, disciplinary and institutional boundaries (Collinge and Gibney, 2010; Collinge et al., 2010; Horlings, 2012b; Horlings et al., 2017; Sotarauta et al., 2012; Sullincaan et al., 2012). Place leadership may emerge in and between different organizations, such as bottom-up citizens’ initiatives, government departments, community groups, not-for profit organizations and the private sector (Collinge and Gibney, 2010). In situations where a

diversity of actors aims to carry out a variety of development activities in the same place, they need to learn to work together which occurs through ‘joint learning-by-doing’. These processes cannot be understood as formal learning settings but as situational, and as part of everyday practices. Place leadership can build collective agency as a result of processes of joint ‘learning-by-doing’ and support institutional innovations to create a more favourable institutional setting for a place-based approach to development. In other words, effective institutional reform (Roep et al., 2003) depends on collective agency being built and this requires collaborative leadership (Collinge and Gibney, 2010). This can potentially lead to more resilient places through bottom-up development and decentralization of decision making (Roep et al., 2015).

These bodies of literature point to the relevance of creating new relations, arranging new interfaces and new forms of collaboration between practitioners or stakeholders from different institutionalized fields of practices or domains to overcome vested interests and generate new ideas and perspectives. A place-based approach to development is the outcome of a process of joint learning and innovation across practitioners from domains and effectuated by new institutional arrangements.

Adapting the ‘learning region’ framework (Morgan, 1997; Rutten and Boekema, 2007), Wellbrock (2013) has framed this as place-based learning and innovation (see Figure 1). This is a generalized version of the framework applied in a comparative study of joint learning in innovation processes across six diverse European rural areas carried out in the context of the European project DERREG (Wellbrock et al., 2013) and an in-depth study of the *Westerkwartier*, a peri-urban rural area near the city of Groningen in

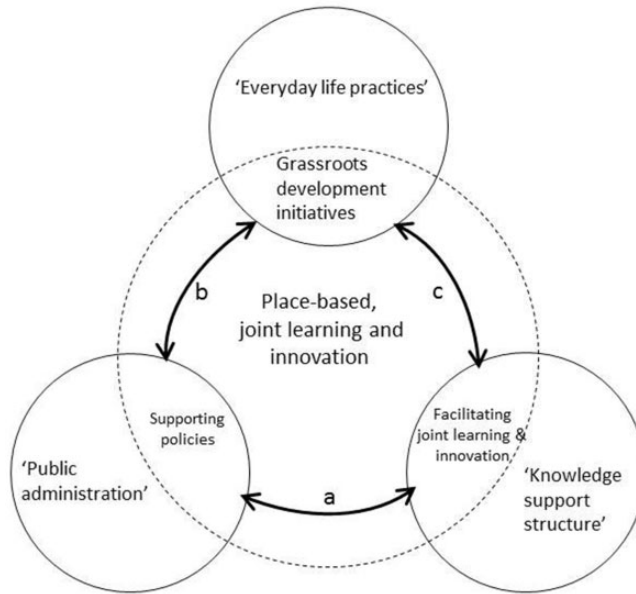


Figure 1. Place-based joint learning and innovation (Wellbrock, 2013: 143).

the north of the Netherlands (Wellbrock and Roep, 2015). The notion of rural is contested and subject to different interpretations and representations (Marsden et al., 2012), but this debate goes beyond the scope of this paper.

The framework enables the mapping and profound analysis of the actual institutional setting and ongoing transformations (see the discussion in Wellbrock et al. (2013)). The framework identifies three mains: the domain of 'everyday life practices' in which grassroots development initiatives are rooted; the domain of 'public administration', formulating and implementing public policies that can support these grassroots or place-based initiatives; and the 'knowledge support structure' of public funded education and research institutes, NGOs and private experts or agencies in education, research and consultancy, that can facilitate joint learning and innovation. The framework stresses the vital importance of (a) joint learning and innovation across the domains, including the active

involvement of policymakers and knowledge workers next to initiators, and (b) newly arranged operational interfaces inter-connecting practitioners from the three domains to support development initiatives, joint capacity building and effective institutional reform.

Joint learning and innovation is especially relevant in the current knowledge economy which needs stewardship of group-based learning and innovation (Cooke and Morgan, 1998; Florida, 1995; Gibney, 2011) and leadership, dealing with a variety of actors and themes in situations and places where no single actor holds power alone. This brings us back to the question addressed in this article on how to frame the role of place leadership in enabling a place-based approach to development.

The literature suggests that leaders work as animateurs and provide linkages into 'localized knowledge clusters'; they acquire and process (in)formal, local and global knowledge (Sotarauta et al., 2012). Stough et al. (2001: 177) argued that place

leadership is ‘the tendency of the community to collaborate across sectors in a sustained, purposeful manner to enhance the economic performance or economic environment of its region’. And while this definition has been challenged by Sotarauta et al. (2012), it provides an important starting point for a better understanding of place leadership. In the next section, we will further explore the role of effective place leadership in place-based development by reviewing the findings from rural case studies in four European research projects.

Exploring the role of place leadership in enabling a place-based approach to development in European rural areas

By reviewing relevant research projects, we aim to underpin how rural place leadership is strongly intertwined with capacity building and the institutional setting. These projects were selected as they all focused on the agency and innovation of everyday practices in quite different rural regions, from more remote, disadvantaged areas subject to population decline to more thriving peri-urban areas with a growing population and commuters, and how these can be enabled via a favourable institutional setting in the context of unbounded processes of globalization, affecting these practices. In this article we thus focus on the contribution of place leadership in more or less successful cases of rural development. Wellbrock et al. (2013), however, made a comparative analysis of both more successful and less successful cases of rural development. In general, the latter lacked well-working operational interfaces, as an indication for an institutional setting that is more favourable to place-based rural development, and, this in turn could be explained

by the lack of connective, collaborative place leadership. We present here chronologically the results of four research projects, including a variety of rural regional cases throughout Europe.

Grassroots rural initiatives

A study of area-based rural initiatives in the Netherlands analysed the role of two environmental cooperatives in place-based development and the conditions for effective institutional reform (Roep et al., 2003). The innovative cooperatives studied within this project contribute to a particular transformation path, re-grounding their agricultural practices collectively in place characteristics and agro-ecological processes. Innovation and transformation are complex and recursive processes in which visionaries and/or change agents play a crucial, leading role. The exploration of this transformation path was conceptualized, using a dynamic framework of technical–institutional change and Strategic Niche Management as a tool. The researchers found five conditions under which institutional changes can take place in rural regions initiated by the agency of rural initiatives (Roep et al., 2003):

1. self-governance referred to as the capacity to manage relations within their organization and with the institutional environment;
2. enrolling capacity to involve, engage, mobilize and use the support of ‘others’ to create, defend and expand the required room to manoeuvre;
3. The production of heterogeneous knowledge from different sources;
4. Integration, referring to the degree in which different projects, aspects and levels are tied together into a whole, gaining momentum for synergy effects;
5. Effective reformism described as expanding capacity to develop new practices.

Their conclusion was that new effective connections are vital to the creation and maintenance of a learning environment, thus aligning varied actors in a self-governance context. This eventually results in institutional reform and a more enabling institutional setting. Place leadership, referred to as change agents, visionaries and local leaders, is needed to make these connections, using capacities to envision windows of opportunities, express expectations and enrol alliances.

ETUDE: Enlarging the theoretical understanding of rural development

The relevance of creating new connections in rural areas was also a key element in the European ETUDE research project, carried out by research institutions in six European countries (the United Kingdom, Germany, the Netherlands, Italy, Latvia and Finland) with the aim of acquiring a better understanding of the dynamics, scope and regional economic impact of rural development processes (Milone and Ventura, 2010). Diverse rural areas were studied from the lens of 'the rural web' (Milone and Ventura, 2010; Van der Ploeg and Marsden, 2008).

According to Van der Ploeg and Marsden (2008) regionalized rural development is grounded and driven by complex sets of externally generated interrelationships and interactions, which shape the relative attractiveness and competitiveness of rural spaces economically, socially, culturally and environmentally. The unfolding of the rural web refers to both the density and the quality of internal and external interactions of different rural spaces, affecting the pathways and velocity of rural development trajectories. An assumption is that the unfolding of the web leads to more 'place-based' development trajectories as endogeneity and place-based assets are important elements within the web.

Within the context of the ETUDE projects over 60 existing empirical studies from previous research projects were reanalysed and 12 newly conducted in-depth case studies across Europe. The case analyses were based on primary and secondary data concerning the actors and institutions involved in the activities and initiatives and their (direct or indirect) social and economic impacts. These activities and initiatives included rural projects in the areas of agricultural production, tourism, education, energy, nature and landscape care and regional branding, as well as research projects, partnerships and grass-roots movements.

A review of the 12 in-depth cases studies from the perspective of leadership showed that place leadership can strengthen varied domains of rural development and can function as vehicle for linking, bonding and bridging forms of capacity building (Horlings, 2012a). Leadership plays a role in building capacities, for example, in the form of initiating change, in supporting multifunctionality or in starting up new businesses.

The ETUDE project showed that institutional arrangements can hamper capacity building but also function as a lubricant. A follow-up research in one of the case study areas, the Shetlands, showed that in a situation when the government expresses leadership, but there is an absence of capacity building in the private sectors, this can render the functioning of institutional arrangements uneven (Horlings and Kanemasu, 2015). Factors such as 'localism' and lack of 'bridging' and 'bonding' capacities can seriously undermine collaboration. However, an underlying shared 'sticky story' (Van der Stoep, 2014) can foster public-private collaboration.

DERREG: 'Developing Europe's rural regions in the era of globalization'

European rural regions have also been studied in the context of the research project

DERREG from 2009 to 2011. Explorative research was carried out within six European, predominantly but quite diverse rural areas, ranging from more remote areas subject to population decline and a shrinking rural economy to more thriving peri-urban areas attracting commuters and tourism: County Roscommon in Ireland; Comarca de Verín in Spain; the Western part of Groningen Province in the Netherlands (the Westerkwartier); Saarland (est) and Upper Lusatia-Lower Silesia (east) in Germany and Alytus County in Lithuania, all covered by the European LEADER programme. An applied version of the general framework presented in Figure 1 was used as a heuristic tool to guide the investigations along three lines (Wellbrock and Roep, 2015; Wellbrock et al., 2013). First, supporting policies and programmes were mapped and facilitating agents and agencies from the knowledge support structure via extensive literature review and semi-structured expert interviews. Second, policy arrangements were mapped supporting joint learning and innovation between grassroots development initiatives and facilitating agents and agencies. Third, policy arrangements were evaluated and compared between the case studies, in particularly their operational features. Up to eight arrangements were selected in each case study for an in-depth study, which involved face-to-face interviews as well as group discussions. The focus was on identifying factors contributing to or constraining the achievements of grassroots development initiatives.

In all DERREG cases data have been collected via participative observation, interviews, group meetings and by reviewing policy documents and other documents. The research started with mapping and analysing policy strategies and knowledge facilities. Subsequently, grassroots development initiatives were mapped and analysed.

Grassroots development initiatives in the Westerkwartier included, for instance, nature and landscape protection activities and cultural and social activities. Key members of 13 initiatives were identified in this area and approached for an interview about their practices, their future goals and the support they received from public administration as well as from knowledge institutes. Finally, interfaces operating between the different domains of stakeholders were identified and analysed on how they worked. This enabled the identification of well-working operational interfaces and an analysis of why they were working well.

Overall, the six areas studied in the context of the DERREG project revealed that raising collective agency is key to successful approaches to place-based development (see Wellbrock et al., 2013 for the results of the comparative analysis). The institutional setting differs significantly across the study areas, reflecting varied historical dynamics and political cultures, thus creating different starting points for effectuating a place-based approach to development. The particularities of the institutional setting are indeed, as Rodriquez-Pose (2013) argues, key in enabling or hindering role therein. The findings also showed that collective agency requires a joint reconsideration and restructuring of the division of roles and tasks, including those of public administration (Wellbrock, 2013: 85). Shrinking rural economies and related out-migration can weaken social relations and vitality by creating 'institutional voids', posing severe obstacles for initiating a collaborative spirit and the uptake of joint development activities. As some cases showed, raising joint reflexivity among residents, and the facilitation of discussions about issues that really matter to people and their place, appeared to be a first step towards collaboration. Raising joint reflexivity can be a major incentive to inspire residents, create a collaborative spirit, develop

a joint development vision and generate joint activities. In the DERREG case study areas visionary leaders made the difference.

SOLINSA: ‘Agricultural knowledge systems in transition: towards a more effective and efficient support of learning and innovation networks for sustainable agriculture’

The SOLINSA project – carried out from 2010 to 2013 – focused on joint learning and innovation in different European countries and areas, using a network approach on different scales, starting from the awareness that a new understanding of innovation for rural development is far from being consolidated in Europe, and less so at national and regional administrative levels. Learning and innovation in so-called Networks for Sustainable Agriculture (LINSAs) takes place in heterogeneous multi-actor environments. Taking into account such diversity of actors and their dispositions, multi-actor interactions and co-construction of new shared meanings are central components in learning and innovation in these networks. Especially the role of boundary work and boundary objects in enhancing learning and innovation processes in hybrid multi-actor networks for sustainable agriculture (LINSAs) was explored. This was analysed on the basis of six case studies under a common methodology. In developing typologies of boundary work and objects, a grounded approach was used (see Tisenkopfss et al., 2015 for an elaboration on the applied methods). The SOLINSA project discussed how joint learning and reflection in networks can be supported to further stimulate sustainable development. Three integral features were found. Processes of co-evolution are relevant as networks are not static structures, but

evolve over time, changing according to variation in actors’ resources, and strategies, as well as reacting to outside pressure. Joint reflection of the actors involved in these networks was considered as crucial, and furthermore the facilitation of these interactions and processes (Moschitz et al., 2015; Tisenkopfss et al., 2015).

Managing learning and innovation in multi-stakeholder networks requires ‘boundary work’ that improves connectivity between different life worlds, facilitates learning across boundaries and transforms knowledge into innovation (Clark et al., 2011; Klerkx and Leeuwis, 2009; Klerkx et al., 2012; Mollinga, 2010). Boundary work fulfils multiple functions in networks; it generates new knowledge across communities, strengthens the network’s internal structures, brings in new supporters and stimulates the sharing of network ideas and the evolvement of innovation (Tisenkopfss et al., 2015: 27). Bridging leaders play a facilitating role in creating boundary interactions.

On the role of place leaders: A synthesis

The review of research projects shows the role of leaders in collaboration, joint reflexivity, capacity building and the creation of boundary interactions, supporting learning and innovation. The rural case studies across Europe sustain the assumption that successful place leadership can bridge different stakes and overcome vested interests, passing by obstructing or disabling institutionalized routines, creating a collaborative spirit and an inspiring, learning environment. The ability of place leadership appears to be vital to an expanding ‘spiral’ of collaboration and the building of collective agency and institutional arrangements.

But how do leaders initiate such processes in practice? We need to open this black box, to get a more nuanced and deeper understanding of the role of personal and

institutional factors in place-based development and to provide more insight in the possibilities for an adjustment of the precarious balance between formal and informal relations.

For this purpose, we will shed more light on the Westerkwartier area studied in the context of the DERREG project mentioned above, to showcase the role of place leadership in building institutional arrangements.

Place leadership in the Westerkwartier

Collaborate place leadership

The Westerkwartier area in the Netherlands is situated in the northwest of the Netherlands. The area is situated west of the provincial capital Groningen city and comprises the municipalities of Grootegast, Marum and Leek and part of the municipality of Zuidhorn (see Figures 2 and 3).

The size of the Westerkwartier is 345 km², and – from a European perspective – is relatively densely populated area

where 80% of the area is used as agricultural land. The agricultural sector and the industry sector are still seen as the traditional economic pillars of the Westerkwartier, although the contribution of primary agricultural production to GVA and employment has decreased significantly. The socio-economic development of the Westerkwartier is predominantly shaped by its interactions with Groningen city and other nearby urban centres. There is, however, a strong sense of rurality of people in the area. Moreover, most local residents strongly foster its rural identity.

Development in the Westerkwartier is predominantly guided by rural development policies. Regional development policies influence the Westerkwartier mainly indirectly by creating extra-regional development circumstances. Regional policies only target small areas of the Westerkwartier, which are involved in development projects of the region North Netherlands. Place-based development in the Westerkwartier is thus expected to be enhanced by rural development policies.

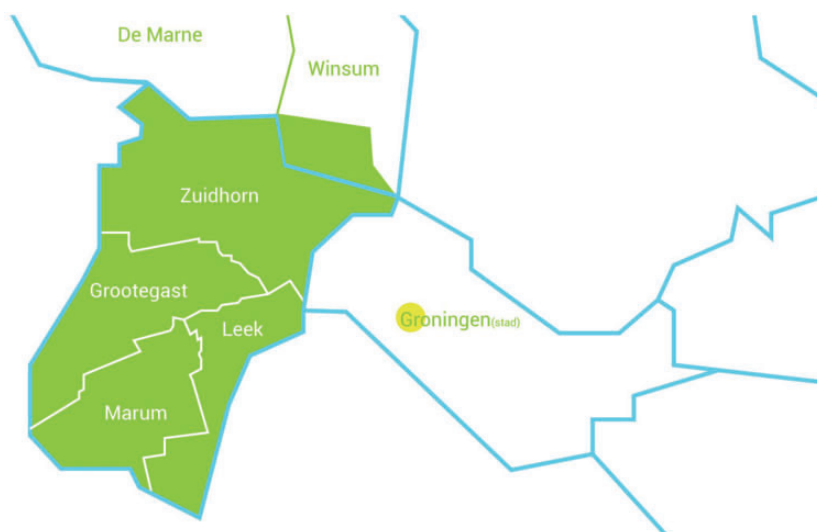


Figure 2. Map of the Westerkwartier.



Figure 3. Location of the Westerkwartier in the Netherlands.

The LEADER programme appeared to be most relevant in this respect. A wide range of public actors is involved in the formulation and implementation of policy objectives and support of public funding for the Westerkwartier. These include, for instance, the European Union, ministries such as the Ministry for Economy, Agriculture and Innovation and the Ministry for Education, Culture and Science, but also the province of Groningen, representatives of local municipalities and water boards. Likewise, a wide range of both public and private actors and agencies can facilitate rural regional learning and innovation in the Westerkwartier. These include public funded knowledge institutes, such as schools and Wageningen University but also numerous private agencies and consultancies.

Leadership started in this region in the beginning of this century in a rather

informal way by a leading group of and collaboration between visionary persons, assembled around the five-year pilot project 'Bridge to the Future', engaging with place-based development in the area. This pilot project was initiated by establishing links between two domains (see Figure 1), the domain of 'knowledge support structure' of Wageningen University, the Van Hall-Larenstein University of Applied Sciences and the domain of everyday practices, where regional stakeholders took the initiative. Collaborative leadership appeared in the joint efforts between one of the stakeholders representing nature interests, the State Forestry manager, and representatives of two agro-environmental associations in the area, coordinating nature and landscape management. These actors were able to bridge conflicts of interest in this area around land use and rural development. One of the key issues was if in this area

future development should be targeted towards nature, the increase of agricultural production or the support of non-agricultural entrepreneurship.

The leaders of the associations created cooperation between farmers, bridging the different interests of nature and agricultural stakeholders. The State Forestry manager had the abilities to create a sense of common interest and a collaborative vision with regard to nature and landscape management in the Westerkwartier. In a rather informal way, he has built trust by promoting common interest and collaboration openly to his superiors and politicians and, more convincing, by initiating small-scale collaborations. He was able to do so because he was generally seen as a person to rely on and trustworthy. He was very familiar with the area, embedded in networks on different administrative levels and able to connect initiatives to policy networks.

The first step in the development process, started in the context of the pilot project, was the building of a joint spirit among stakeholders in the area. The project promoted links between grassroots initiatives and the knowledge infrastructure via joint research and education practices in cooperation with the Van Hall-Larenstein University of Applied Sciences. A lecturer of this institute and leading member of one of the agro-environmental associations in the area created possibilities for students to do assignments for the association. The results of these assignments were discussed during a regional event (*Streekdag*) in the area and this further enhanced dialogue, joint reflection and a collaborative spirit.

A second step was the building of fruitful collaboration. This resulted from the mutually reinforcing process of increased joint reflexivity on the qualities and strengths of the area and as a spin-off, collaborative activities. The people involved in the pilot project united themselves in the

Westerkwartier Area Initiative (WAI) in 2004, promoting various activities in tourism and nature/landscape management. The founders of the WAI excelled as informal leaders, able to mediate between key persons of grassroots initiatives, public officers and politicians and lecturers, researchers and consultants. They were the spider in a web of relations. Through their visionary spirit, this initiative has since then taken the lead in promoting grassroots development activities, acting as an interface between the domains of public administration, knowledge support structure and the rural area. This gave an impetus to collaboration in the area. Place leadership thus supported a favourable, place-tailored institutional setting.

The third step encompassed the building of formal and informal institutional arrangements and collective agency such as the Westerkwartier Cooperative of entrepreneurs, a Local Action Group (LAG), and a Knowledge Atelier (*Kenniswerkplaats*). The Knowledge Atelier made an inventory of research questions of stakeholders, thus connecting the grassroots initiatives with the knowledge support structure. This refers to an innovative methodology in green education by means of which students and lecturers get engaged in investigating regional questions commissioned by stakeholders. The idea was to create a strong learning environment for students, generating practical and sometimes unconventional perspectives and stimulating contributions to regional development.

How did these arrangements emerge? The pilot project helped the WAI to maintain good relations with public administration. Municipalities, and with them the province, became willing to partially fund small-scale projects initiated by the WAI. The WAI gradually build fruitful collaborative relations with the four municipalities

and the province and developed a Leader Action Plan. The Plan was approved and later in 2007, a LAG of 10 members was installed by the Province of Groningen. By the end of 2010, the Westerkwartier was selected as experimental area by a national programme of the Ministry, supporting Knowledge Ateliers. Funds were available for the Knowledge Atelier and the development of a regional development programme, which formed the basis for more institutionalized collaboration. This also resulted in the launch of the Westerkwartier Cooperative of entrepreneurs at the end of 2012.

The process over time showed that place leadership played an inspiring, mediating and intervening role in the institutional setting. Via the inclusion of and mediation between different actors from the domains of knowledge, policy and initiatives, a joint spirit and joint reflexivity of actors on the qualities of the area were supported. Leadership was grounded in the particularities of place, in order to enhance economic possibilities and maintain the quality of the landscape. Key actors played an intervening role in building new 'operational interfaces' and institutional arrangements.

Newly arranged operational interfaces

'Operational interfaces' were installed in the area to bridge the different domains of research, governance and initiatives on the ground. The interfaces included catalyst functions, specific infrastructures and development projects (see also Wellbrock and Roep, 2015). Concrete examples of operational interfaces were the instalment of innovation brokers, a Rural House and Rural Cafés. The Rural House started in 2008, was funded by LEADER with co-financing from the municipalities and province, and is a physical meeting place in the form of a building in the middle of the region. The main idea was to offer a low

threshold entry for residents with rural development-related questions and grass-roots initiatives. 'They should see it as their place, not as an outpost of the public administration', as one of the founding members remarked. The Rural House is an institutional arrangement which offers a physical and virtual window for the consultation of public officers of the municipalities and province and a team of experts from different organizations. One of the organizations participating in the Rural House is the Association Villages Groningen. This association offers professional support and funds livability projects of villages to initiatives such as a new born network of starting business women, called Wichterwest. Wichterwest developed into a support network for women entrepreneurs itself, organizing meetings and workshops to facilitate exchange and learning, and providing expertise for women who want to start a business career. Three so-called touristic catalysts funded by the province fostered networking and cooperation in rural tourism. These operational agents and agencies met formally and informally in the Rural House and worked as assigned innovation brokers with specific set of tasks. Next to their professional skills, the granted operational flexibility appeared to be key to their fruitful operations. Within the limits of the tasks assigned they could decide for themselves what could be done best to support innovation. Informal facilitators of joint learning and innovation such as The Rural Café created possibilities for low threshold gathering to enable entrepreneurs and residents to meet, initiate and discuss ideas. These Cafés were organized around a theme to ensure that people with a shared interest could meet and interact. The Rural Cafés were well attended, up to 100 people, and well appreciated. In effect it mobilized and inspired a lot of people, resulting in wider support and new initiatives.

Reflection

In approximately a decade the initial informal network of the WAI evolved in a step-by-step manner into a successive range of fruitful formal networks. The founders of this grassroots initiative functioned as informal leaders and actively promoted what Wellbrock et al. (2015) have framed as a ‘learning rural region’. Their ability to get things done, first little by little and then increasingly by acquiring additional funds, made their effort fruitful. The WAI, supported politically and financially by the LAG and thus the European Leader programme, was important for generating

wider engagement in the area, and has resulted in new institutional arrangements (Wellbrock and Roep, 2015). Leadership has been crucial to the ‘spiral’ process of expanding joint spirit, fruitful collaboration and public private alliances in the area.

The case of the rural area Westerkwartier in the Netherlands illustrates how place leadership can create the momentum for joint place-based reflexivity. The leading group of visionary persons raised new spirit, involving the engagement of residents and various activities, thereby gradually building joint capacities to make things work according to their shared values and vision. The Rural Café, the

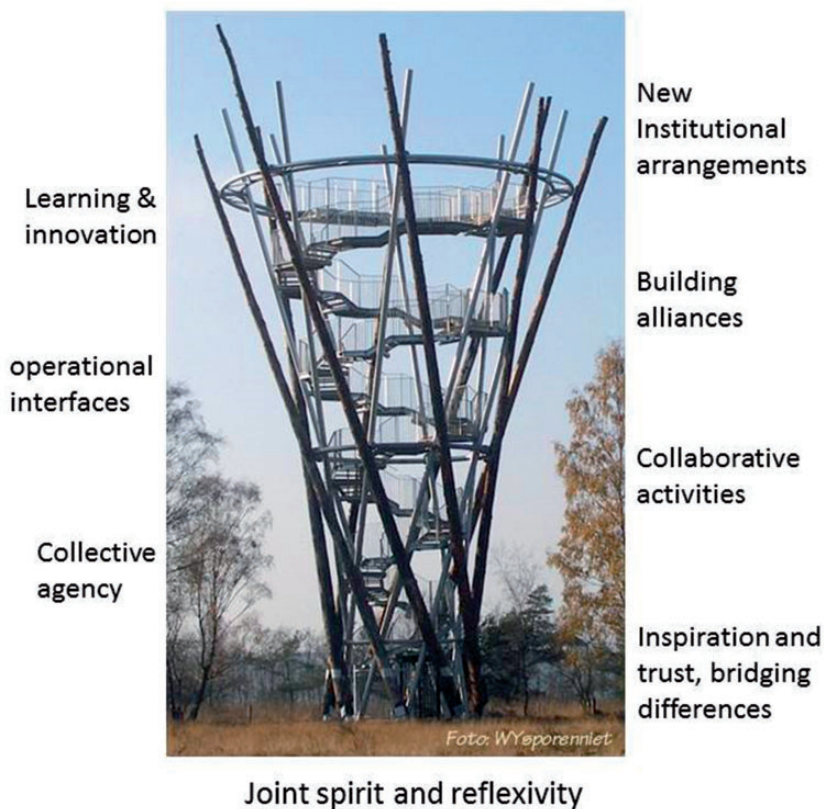


Figure 4. Re-enforcing, spiraling development of building collective agency and effective institutional reform.

Rural house and touristic catalysts functioned as operational interfaces, connecting initiatives with local and regional governments and knowledge institutes. While these 'well-working interfaces' in the Westerkwartier created trust between actors and supported collective agency, the result of interaction and collective agency resulted in new informal networks and institutions such as the WAI. A balance between formal and informal institutions was created, which in turn enabled collective agency to flourish.

Our findings indicate that place leadership played a key role in initiating and enabling an expanding process in places via expanding fruitful collaboration, building collective capacities, public-private alliances and the building of complementary institutional arrangements. We have visualized this in Figure 4, using a spiralling tower as a metaphor. The figure shows how collective agency results from mutually reinforcing processes of reflexivity and joint capacities built in collaborative activities, involving more actors over time. Arranging operational interfaces that connect and mediate between the domains supports joint learning and innovation which is fundamental to raising collective agency and self-efficacy in places. We suggest that place leadership potentially can create the momentum to a joint spirit and place-based reflexivity, based on inspiration and mutual trust and support from interfaces between the domains, thus bridging differences between stakeholders and embedding fruitful collaboration in new arrangements, more informal than formal. More empirical research is, however, needed to analyse if and how such 'spiral processes' occur in different institutional contexts.

Discussion and conclusions

We have argued that rural place leadership is vital to enabling a place-based approach

to rural development. This is all the more relevant in the face of generic economic, environmental and social challenges which work out spatially differently in places, creating inequalities, exclusion and dispersed, unevenly distributed problems. The OECD (2009) stresses the characteristics of regions and their place specificity and proposes to go beyond the 'one-size-fits-all' development approaches. It has been suggested that a place-based approach is the best way to tackle the persistent underutilization of potential and reducing persistent social exclusion (Barca, 2009), based on the exploration of the potential of each place and ensuring equal opportunities for individuals irrespective of where they live.

However, till now, little is known about the best way to implement a place-based approach (Jauhianen and Moilanen, 2011). We would argue that such an approach should not merely be understood as a means to enhance competitiveness between and within regions, but support decentralization and self-efficacy of people, to enhance the resilience of vulnerable regions, responding to the structuring and spatially dispersed forces of globalization.

We have argued here that a place-based approach requires capacity building, collaboration, collective agency and place-specific institutional arrangements to start and support joint learning and innovation. Our observations based on a multiple analysis of rural cases throughout Europe point to the crucial role of place leadership therein, creating a more favourable institutional setting as a starting point for development. The ability of rural place leadership to involve and align various stakeholders, citizens and activities; to bridge vested stakes and make new connections; to initiate joint reflection and create a collaborative spirit, seems to be vital here. We have argued that rural place leadership can initiate a gradually expanding 'spiral' process where joint

reflexivity, fruitful collaboration, the building of capacities and alliances and embedding in new (institutional) arrangements mutually enforce each other. This supports joint learning and innovation which can further increase the range and impact of development initiatives and can even result in institutional reform. Our findings underpin the importance of place leadership in building collective agency to better attune the institutional setting to the specificities of place and enable a place-based approach to development.

Such place leadership is – as has been discussed before, also in this journal – task oriented; supports learning by doing; crosses thematic, geographic, disciplinary and institutional boundaries; and engages with a variety of stakeholders (Horlings et al., 2017). Place leadership initiates and enables connectivity via the creation of new linkages between domains; in their role as boundary spanner, by strengthening network interactions, contributing to bonding and bridging between people (Beer and Clower, 2013).

The findings of the discussed cases can inform the wider theoretical debate on the role of agency and institutions in local economies. Institutions are the ‘key enablers of innovation, mutual learning and productivity growth’ and thus pave the way for the design and implementation of efficient economic development strategies across territories (Putnam, 2000, cited by Rodriquez-Pose (2013: 325)). The less favourable the institutional setting is, the less fertile ground there is for a spiral development to flourish, the less likely it is that institutional intervention will be held. In such situations collaborative, visionary leaders are needed to initiate it. This underpins the relevance of the quality of institutions as discussed by, for example, Henry and Pinch (2001), Rodriquez-Pose (2013) and Rodriques-Pose and Di Cataldo (2015). In a dense institutional setting the

appearance of initiatives and a collaborative spirit are more likely to occur; however, the institutional density may also complicate and hamper collaborations, and different agendas may compete for dominance.

This brings us back to the key question on *how* to create an institutional setting which allows place leadership to flourish, acknowledging that the right mix of formal and informal institutions is needed, targeted to every specific place (Rodriquez-Pose, 2013: 21). ‘Well-working operational interfaces’ turn out to be a relevant condition providing the experimental space and support for bottom-up networks, crucial for grassroots innovations to flourish (Leach et al., 2012). Especially in institutional ‘thin’ rural areas, joint reflexivity on place-based issues can create a collaborative spirit and form the starting point for a place-based approach to development. In order to react to the particularities of place, operational flexibility appears to be crucial here.

The available empirical findings provided in this article lead us to conclude that place leadership can initiate and support a favourable institutional setting in which collaborative agency can flourish, but also contributes itself to place-specific innovation. This is an evolutionary process; the collective agency of all stakeholders resulting in new institutional arrangements tailored and attuned to the characteristics of place, in turn can favour a place-based approach to development.

Places with effective, transformative place leadership are likely to be more resilient than those where leadership is not developed (Beer and Clower, 2013). Our findings confirm the findings of earlier case studies that effective place leadership needs to be based on collaboration, power sharing, a forward-looking approach and flexibility. Governments can promote the emergence of transformative leadership by delegating powers to communities wherever

possible including the building of a well-balanced mix of formal and informal institutions (Beer and Clower, 2013). So, to have place leadership to flourish, we need place-based institutions and arrangements as well. They can only be developed and evolve in time.


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ORCID iD

D Roep  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1728-2185>

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